

# ***International Center for Religion & Diplomacy***

## **THE MIDDLE EAST JUSTICE & RECONCILIATION INITIATIVE THE MUSALAHA/ICRD RECONCILIATION INITIATIVE TRIP REPORT**

by

**Brian Cox**

### **Introduction**

ICRD officials conducted two faith-based reconciliation seminars in Cyprus in October 2007. The first faith-based reconciliation dialogue was conducted October 21 – 24 at the Crown Resort Henipa Hotel in Larnaca in cooperation with the Islamic Studies Centre based in Damascus. The second faith-based reconciliation seminar was conducted October 28 – 31 at the Atlantica Miramare Beach Hotel in Limassol in cooperation with Musalaha, based in Jerusalem.

The mission of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy is to address identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. As such, it is committed to faith-based diplomacy. The mission of the Islamic Studies Centre is to promote revival in the Islamic world by sponsoring Islamic – Christian dialogue, contributing to Islamic – Islamic dialogue to foster alternatives to fanaticism, launching Islamic – Secular dialogue to establish common ground and uniting with other study centers in promoting civilizational dialogue. The mission of Musalaha is to promote reconciliation between Israeli and Palestinian believers around the life and teaching of Jesus and to build bridges with other segments of Israeli/Palestinian society.

### **Description of the Faith-Based Reconciliation Methodology**

The faith-based reconciliation dialogue represents a bold fusion of two faith-based intervention models. The first model is the Reconciliation Basic Seminar which utilizes a series of presentations and small group exercises, culminating in a Service of Reconciliation, to explain the core values of faith-based reconciliation, empower participants in reconciliation/peacebuilding skills, and provide a climate that will change hearts as well as minds.

The presentations included the following topics:

- Introduction: The Journey of Reconciliation
- Reconciliation As A Moral Vision
- Building Bridges: The Principle of Pluralism

- Demolishing Walls of Hostility: The Principle of Inclusion
- Conflict Resolution: The Principle of Peacemaking
- Seeking The Common Good: The Principle of Social Justice
- Healing Relationships: The Principle of Forgiveness
- Facing the Truth About History: The Principle of Healing Collective Wounds
- Submission to God: The Principle of Sovereignty
- Becoming An Instrument of Reconciliation

The small group dialogues facilitate the building of relationships and trust. They include: sharing one's life journey, identifying core values, exploring collective identity, describing the problems to be solved from different perspectives, analyzing personal hostility toward others, developing a problem-solving approach to the conflict, analyzing the distribution of group privilege, analyzing broken relationships, exploring the nature of the offense(s) experienced by each group, conducting an honest conversation about the history of the region, developing strategies for healing and examining each participant's sphere of influence for extending the spirit of reconciliation. The Service of Reconciliation at the end provides an opportunity for participants to focus on broken individual relationships as well as collective expressions of acknowledgement, apology and forgiveness.

The second intervention model is the Learning Conversation model which seeks to create an enlightened dialogue in the context of an intractable identity-based conflict or problem. This model involves five steps:

- Sharing life journeys and building common ground
- Sharing perceptions of the conflict or problem
- Sharing where each has experienced and/or caused offense to the other
- Exploring each community's narrative of history and perception of historical wounds
- Engaging in a problem-solving approach, utilizing a faith-based reconciliation paradigm to address the particular conflict or problem

### **The Middle East Justice & Reconciliation Initiative**

There are three key objectives of the Middle East Justice & Reconciliation Initiative:

- To establish a religious framework for peace in the Middle East upon which political leaders can build.
- To contribute to the process of healing the broken family of Abraham in the Middle East as a faith-based approach to peacemaking.
- To share and spread a vision of faith-based reconciliation as an alternative to religious extremism.

The following observations are based on the experience leading up to and the results of the four day meeting:

- We encountered serious obstacles in obtaining cooperation from the Syrian government for any Syrians to participate in this meeting. This is a reflection of the current hostile state of U.S./Syrian relations. It also reflects the government's frustration at being unable to completely control the outcome of the last meeting in Syria. In the end five Syrian Muslims were given permission from the government. Two of our Syrian partners, Bassam Ishak and Dr. Mohammed Habash were not given permission to travel.
- The Islamic Studies Centre recruited five participants from Jordan from the Moderation Assembly For Thought And Culture, a non governmental organization based in Amman (all former members of the Muslim Brotherhood).
- Syrian participants: Dr. Abdul Kader Alkitani, Dr. Rufaida Habash, Ahmed Husseini, Ghada Gazal, Ghada Kizawi. Jordanian participants: Marwan Al-Fouri, Sawson Al-Momani, Dr. Salah Braizat, Dr. Nawal Al-Fouri, Sheik Ibrahim Shuhban. Palestinian participant: Gabriel Abdalla. U.S. participants: John Sandoz (ICRD Board), Chris Seiple (IGE), The Reverend Dr. Gwynne Guibord, Michael Witmer, Professor Tim Pownall (Pepperdine Law School), The Reverend Dr. James Warnock, Archbishop Robert Parlotz, Rob Moll (Christianity Today).
- The format of the faith-based reconciliation dialogue provided participants with a new model for peacemaking in the Middle East that is based on a religious framework rather than the traditional secular conflict resolution model. Our hope is that as this project gains momentum that some creative possibilities for peace in the Middle East will emerge that do not currently exist.
- The presentations were well received by the participants and challenged them to deepen their understanding of the Abrahamic tradition and the concept of faith-based reconciliation. Our Syrian partners contributed reflections from the Arab/Muslim perspective on each of the eight core values. Archbishop Parlotz gave a special presentation on "Religious Extremism and Militancy".
- The small group dialogues and exercises created both lively discussion and a growing ability to trust one another across the chasm of religious, cultural and political differences. One group struggled with overcoming the bitter differences in current Syrian/American relations. There were moments of frustration with the process in this one group. However, in the end, most participants came to appreciate the potential of faith-based reconciliation as a religious framework for peacemaking in the Middle East.
- The exercise on offenses given and received provided the opportunity for Middle East Muslims and American Christians to meet in two separate working groups to identify areas of offence received from each other and caused by each other. The purpose of

this exercise is to surface antagonism in the parties as a part of creating a cooperative problem solving process. The two groups reconvened and then shared the results with each other. The Americans felt surprised by the lack of acknowledgement of any offenses caused to them by Middle East Muslims.

- The Service of Reconciliation provides the opportunity to acknowledge offenses, apologize and offer forgiveness. There were a number of heartfelt acknowledgements and apologies offered from both sides. Numerous prayers were offered by both Christians and Muslims. It was obvious that the various groups were seeking to respond in a “healing way” to what had been vocalized earlier in the seminar.
- The Diplomatic Working Groups provided the opportunity for the participants to engage in a problem solving approach to the Middle East conflict utilizing a faith-based reconciliation framework instead of the traditional conflict resolution lens. Initially, each of the groups struggled to come up with concrete proposals to address the relevant issues. However, persistence did lead to a breakthrough with some creative and concrete proposals. In future meetings our goal will be to formulate a document that reflects the fruit of their labor.
- Resources permitting, I recommend that the following next steps be taken in developing the strategic aspects of the Middle East Justice & Reconciliation Initiative:
  1. Brian Cox and John Sandoz conduct two exploratory trips in 2008 to identify potential partners and participants among Sunni/Salafi leaders of Saudi Arabia and Muslim Brotherhood/Hizbullah/Hamas leaders of Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt.
  2. Accept the invitation from the Moderation Assembly For Thought and Culture to hold the third Faith-Based Reconciliation Dialogue in Amman, Jordan in November 2008 as a joint venture of ICRD, the Islamic Studies Centre and the Moderation Assembly for Thought and Culture.

### **The Musalaha/ICRD Reconciliation Initiative**

The purpose of the Musalaha/ICRD Faith-Based Reconciliation Initiative is to promote faith-based reconciliation among Jews, Christians and Muslims in Israel and the Palestinian Authority as a religious framework for peacemaking specifically between Israel and Palestine. It seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- Bring together Palestinian Christians and Muslims in the context of desert encounters and faith-based reconciliation seminars as a first stage.
- Bring together Palestinian Christians and Israeli Jews in the context of desert encounters and faith-based reconciliation seminars as a second stage.
- Bring members of all groups together in the context of desert encounters and faith-based reconciliation seminars as a third stage.

## **Muslim-Christian Encounter Report**

by

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Last year, Musalaha embarked on a new Bridge-Building initiative, targeting the Muslim and Christian Palestinian communities in the Bethlehem region. It has quickly become one of the fastest growing projects, attracting attention locally and abroad, and has demonstrated enormous potential for further expansion. The tensions between these two communities is real, and has become a serious problem. Many Palestinian Christians, faced with oppression from the Israelis on one side, and with ostracization and even violence from some of their own Palestinian brothers and sisters on the other, have chosen immigration. The number of Palestinian Christians in Israel/P.A. has been greatly reduced because of immigration. They face increasing oppression from the radical Muslims, and suffer from the lawlessness and lack of order that has troubled Palestinian society. Muslim-Christian reconciliation must be sought after because it is tearing apart Palestinian society, but it is also necessary for more general reasons. Reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis is impossible unless the Palestinians first deal with their own divisions and can then present a more unified front when attempting to reconcile with Israelis.

After a year of preparation, (recruiting, identifying potential leaders, logistical arrangements), Musalaha held its inaugural Muslim-Christian Desert Encounter in October 2006. It was a great success and blessing for all the participants. They made serious progress in the building of relationships, resolving conflict between the two communities, and Bridge-Building. The same group met several more times in a number of follow up meetings, to further strengthen their friendships, and discuss how to implement what they had decided on in the desert. In the end of October 2007, we proceeded with the next step in this project, by inviting the same 24 Palestinian Muslim and Christians participants, and Rev. Brian Cox of the *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy* to our five day seminar in Cyprus.

Rev. Cox has invaluable experience working on faith-based reconciliation all over the world, and specifically working with Muslims and Christians. He was asked to lead the seminar, and we were anxious to see if his approach would be applicable to the Muslims and Christians in the Palestinian context. He began by emphasizing our shared Abrahamic faith, and trying to establish a moral vision, with specific values that are common between the two groups, such as inclusion, peace-making, social justice, and forgiveness. The five day seminar was very intense, as is to be expected, as the days (and evenings!) were filled with lectures, training workshops, and discussion among the participants. It was tiring and yet very uplifting and encouraging as well, and the participants felt as though they had really acquired some of the tools needed to further the Bridge-Building effort, and to help resolve conflicts in their communities.

One of the most interesting activities we did during the seminar had to do with identifying our own values, and understanding the values of others. The Muslims and Christians were split up into two groups, and then asked to list what values the other group would be. This is an informative exercise because although our values can tell much about us, we don't often spend much time thinking about what they are, much less contemplating what others might think our values are. The results were fascinating for a number of reasons. First, they demonstrated how influential things like our faith, culture, history, and tradition are on our values. Second, they showed both the proximity in some ways, and the distance in others, that exists between these two neighboring communities.

The Muslim group's values:

1. Submission to God
2. Moral righteousness
3. Religious Practice
4. Health
5. Justice

The values Muslims thought the Christians would list:

1. Forgiveness
2. Family
3. Religious practice
4. Health
5. Submission to God

The Christian group's values:

1. Unity (between Christians)
2. Love and Forgiveness
3. Family
4. Respect
5. Security for the community

The values Christians thought the Muslims would list:

1. Submission to God
2. Authority
3. Religious practice
4. Tradition
5. Justice

For example, The Muslims guessed that the Christians would consider "Family" and "Forgiveness" as important values, but didn't realize that "Respect" and 'Security for the Community' were so important, two values that take on added significance when it is remembered that the Palestinian Christians are a minority. Likewise, the Christians were able to guess that to the Muslims, 'Submission to God' and 'Religious Practice' were central values, but were sure that the Muslims valued things like 'Authority' and 'Tradition', which were not on the list. This made clear that while in some ways the Muslims and Christians knew each other, in many ways they didn't, especially when it came to sensitive issues. The fact that the Christians thought that 'Authority' would be a core value for the Muslims says something about the power balance between the two communities, because the Muslims strive to obtain and maintain political power. It is an important value for their community. The Muslims didn't know they were perceived in this way by the Christians, and hearing for the first time how they were thought of was a real turning point. After discussion they realized why the Christians had this view of them, and agreed that it is a value for the Muslim community. For the Christians, 'Unity' was highly valued, because of the many denominational divisions among Palestinian Christians, and because they are such a minority. The Muslims were unaware of how important this was to their Christian neighbors.

This exercise also highlighted the different religious cultures among the two groups. For while the Christians valued 'Forgiveness', the Muslims valued 'Religious practice' such as fasting and praying. We see that among this group of Muslims, the focus was on more visible

displays of pious-ness, while for the Christians, the focus was on inter-communal values. In the end, both groups came together, and formulated a joint list of values. This was a key component, because it gave them a sense of togetherness and provided them with a foundation they could all agree on. Without values that are important to all, there can be no reconciliation, and it was encouraging to see that there are many basic values that are important to both groups.

1. Truth
2. Respect
3. Family
4. Peace
5. Security

It was a good sign that the Muslims and Christians had no problem whatsoever coming up with a list of shared values. However it was also very interesting to see how culture and tradition plays a role in the shaping of these values. For example, you would think that for the Palestinians, Muslim and Christian, who live under occupation and in near constant conflict, would value things like 'Peace' and 'Security'. While they did value these things highly, they were listed below things such as 'Truth', 'Respect', and 'Family'. This is evident in Palestinian culture, where family is the center of society, and respect is not an option. It is also important to note that although they were able to list shared values with ease, the values they listed as a religious group, and the values they listed together, were significantly different. There was some overlap, but the Muslims clearly had some values that the Christians did not share, and *vice versa*. It is often these values, which are not common to both groups, that can lead to tension and conflict since they indicate conflicting visions about the future and character of society.

During the conference, a conversation started between a Muslim woman and a Christian woman, about the nature of God. The Muslim woman was saying our only response to God should be submission, while the Christian woman claimed that we could also experience his love. They are surprised to find that they were so far apart on this issue, and while talking about it didn't make either of them change their minds, it did give them something to talk, and think about. It also helped them understand each other better, because your conception of God is a very important aspect of your identity. Seeing the difference and truly comprehending where the other person is coming from, makes reconciliation possible. This is always the first step.

In another meeting, we split into Muslim and Christian groups again, and each group had to explain what about the other group was offensive to them. This is not an easy thing to do, but it is important for everyone to be heard, and for both groups to hear how they are perceived by the other.

Christian complaints against Muslims:

1. Do not feel respect for their traditions
2. Take advantage of their weakness as minority
3. Treat Christian women with disrespect
4. School curriculum too Islamic
5. Palestinians suffer because of what Christians in other countries do, collective punishment

Muslim complaints against Christians:

1. Christian self-isolation from community
2. Discrimination against Muslims in workplace.
3. Disrespectful of Islamic traditions
4. Christians get better treatment from Israelis
5. They receive help from Christians overseas, but do not help Muslims

The Muslims were surprised to learn how threatened the Christians feel, and were shocked at their level of insecurity. The Christian response was one typical of a minority that feels under threat, and the Muslim response was also typical of the majority, generally unaware of the threat perceived by the smaller group. Most of these complaints were generally accepted by both sides; however some of them generated lots of discussion. For example, the Christians objected to the claim that they do not share the help they receive from overseas with their Muslim neighbors, and to the Muslim complaint that they get different treatment from the Israeli army, and are given passes to leave the West Bank easier. This discussion was useful for both sides to see themselves from a different perspective. Both groups were able to agree that there should be a focus on the young generation, because they are far more susceptible to the influence of radical strains of Islam that have gained prominence in recent years. The freedom to say these things openly, without fear of being silenced, and secure in the knowledge that you are being heard, is the whole purpose of this project. It is an enormous achievement that this group was able to talk about, and come to an agreement on the problems causing the conflict between their communities. Not only this, but they were able to listen openly to the other side, and expressed willingness to address these problems and make changes as a result. This was a huge step in the process of reconciliation.

The seminar ended with the whole group agreeing to continue with this dialogue once they return to Bethlehem, and to work together towards the implementation of the measures that were discussed. Among these was a condemnation of the use of violence by both sides during confrontation (even though they agreed that in many cases Muslims resort to violence faster), a proposal for a new school curriculum that is religiously neutral, and not like the Islamic-infused one currently in use among the Palestinians, and an initiative to begin a religious dialogue based on respect and tolerance. Perhaps most importantly, they agree to investigate the mass Christian emigration, and attempt to stem this tide of Christians leaving the community. This is an encouraging development, given the recent increase in tension and violence among the Palestinian Muslims and Christians. As these community leader return to their everyday lives, their experience with Musalaha will hopefully influence their behavior towards each other, and influence those around them.